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SUBJECT: BASHKORTOSTAN - WAITING FOR CHANGE

¶1. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Not for internet distribution.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Political/Economic Officer and LES Pol/Econ assistant traveled to Ufa June 29-July 1, meeting with human rights and opposition activists, the rabbi, and exponents of women's rights. We participated in the opening of an English language summer camp and led a discussion at the American Corner. Recurring topics raised by interlocutors in our meetings were Rakhimov's future, corruption, and voter apathy. All bemoaned the sequestration of wealth by Rakhimov, agreed that he will not be reappointed, and told us there is no reason to vote as long as he is in office. End summary.

The End of an Era Near

¶3. (SBU) According to Konstantin Potnin, who runs his own NGO and is affiliated with the Moscow Helsinki Group, the "consumer democracy" of Bashkortostan provides the basis for political stability. Yedinnaya Rossiya (YR) holds a remarkable 62 percent of local дума seats while an additional 30 percent of local deputies are YR supporters. Potnin and Anatoliy Dubovskiy, head of the Rus opposition group, speculated freely on the future of Bashkortostan president Rakhimov. Any change from Rakhimov will be positive, they both said. All our interlocutors also agreed that Rakhimov will not be reappointed in 2011 when his term expires; opinions differ as to whether he will be asked to depart before then. One observer believes that by this September Rakhimov will be out, as Moscow has now disentangled him from his Bashneft holdings. Non-Bashkirs complained about Bashkirization of schools, business and public life. It is said that Tatars are the force behind opposition internet sites, but our contacts do not think that conflict between Bashkirs and Tatars has been an issue since the border dispute was resolved in 1989. We were told that visitors from the Kremlin recently inquired about inter-ethnic relations in the republic and that the Kremlin knows that potential ethnic disputes will be avoided if a Russian is appointed president (this according to an ethnic Russian).

¶4. (SBU) The topic of corruption also provoked lively discussions at all our meetings. Grand corruption in the privatization of state-owned-enterprises in the early 1990s was acknowledged by all. One contact himself lost his business many years ago as part of Rakhimov's acquisition of assets. Election fraud is also widely discussed and acknowledged. No one we talked to bothers to vote because, they say, the results are pre-ordained. Several people commented on the 2005 elections when voter turnout was alleged to be 80 percent although people in the cities do not vote. It turned out that thousands of fake ballots were printed; activists protested and provided ample evidence of the fraud to Moscow. A court case was initiated. In the end, however, only an employee of the printing company was convicted; those who initiated the fraud went free.

American- Bashkir Intercollege English Language Summer Camp

15. (U) City and school officials, camp instructors, Pol/Econ officer, and camp founder Vyacheslav Shvaiko opened the seventh annual Intercollege English Language Summer Camp on June 30. The summer camp program was launched by ELO Bridget Gerston and Fullbright alum Shvaiko and targets gifted children from low-income families, providing them with three weeks of English instruction with American teachers and Russian alumni of USG-funded programs. All activities are conducted in English. The camp serves as a model for other regions in Russia and some European countries. It receives full support from the city Ministry of Education and school authorities. During the school year the campers participate in Access language programs to gain skills for the camp, which includes leadership training to give these students more self-confidence. Highlights of the opening ceremony included traditional Bashkir dancing, Bashkir-Russian rap, and an announcement that the government of Bashkortostan will fund scholarships for academic gold medal winners to attend universities in Moscow. Many of the prize winners are alumni of the Access and summer camp programs.

Fishing for a Congregation

16. (SBU) Rabbi Dan Krichevskiy operates the Ufa synagogue/community center on a business model. He says the product he is selling is God and like a fisherman he tries different bait to get people into the center to be exposed to God. The center houses a synagogue, school, gym, exercise room, offices, and kosher restaurant. The synagogue offers a free playground for children while their parents attend services. He estimates the Jewish population of Bashkortostan to be around 15,000, of whom about 9,000 live in Ufa. Over 1,000 people attend the high holiday services while about 120 attend regularly. He has not seen any examples of religious

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discrimination or harassment, but notes that the government requires businessmen to donate funds to muslim groups but will not assist the synagogue. In a twist of irony, when Vladislav Surkov recently visited Ufa to discuss Rakhimov's future (after Rakhimov's public criticism of YR) he also opened a new mosque and the celebration dinner was held at the synagogue restaurant, the only kosher/halal facility in Ufa. Krichevskiy has been in Ufa for just over ten years, arriving after completing his studies in New York with the Lubavitzer rabbi. He is married and has five children. His brother is in Omsk, his brother-in-law in Tomsk, and his sister in Moscow.

Women's Rights

17. (SBU) We met with Alevtina Yemelyanova, former director of the Women's Crisis Center, and Anisa Yenikeyeva, president of the Union of Bashkirian Women. Both recognize the existence of discrimination against women in Bashkortostan, and in Russia. They stressed that women are usually the first to be fired and are paid less than men. Only seven of the 120 deputies in the republic's legislative assembly are women. They stated that women generally do not vote and that the population in general is indifferent to political life in the republic because they do not expect any changes. The situation might change, however, if the next president is not a representative of the local elites. People are afraid of retaliation against their families and prefer not to oppose the current regime. Three crisis centers now operate in Ufa, and they are now supported by the government and do not rely on private funding. The centers work mainly with teenage mothers offering them psychological assistance and child care. Spousal violence is not taken seriously by the local police.

American Corner

18. (SBU) On June 30, Pol/Econ officer meet with an audience of all ages to discuss the role of women's rights in U.S. foreign policy and to hear views of the audience regarding women in politics in Russia. Opinions ranged from the view that women should stay at home (expressed by a high-school aged girl) to the view that Russia badly needs more women in meaningful

government positions (expressed by a woman who wrote her PhD thesis at Kent State University contrasting women's rights in the U.S. and Russia). The audience was hungry for contact with Americans and suggested several topics for future gatherings. A contingent of enthusiastic past and future IREX participants contributed to the lively discussion. During our time in Ufa we heard from various contacts that access to the American Corner has been limited and that programs there are not well publicized so no one knows what the schedule is. The calendar on the Moscow web-site is difficult to use. Some regular users of the Corner report that they must call the director on his cell to make sure he will be there before heading over.

Comment

19. (SBU) The political atmosphere was a blast from the past. We were followed to all our meetings by security agents, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative was present at several meetings, our appointments with government officials or at government-owned enterprises must be approved by the Prime Minister, and our LES Pol/Econ assistant's cell-phone was monitored. Just three weeks before our visit, a district court ruled that the blog "Revinform News Agency" on livejournal.com is extremist. Earlier this year the opposition website ufagub.com was also declared extremist and the owners had to move their site to a server in the United States. Those human rights and opposition activists who are successful (in the sense that their organizations are allowed to operate and work with government officials) know how to pick their issues and battles. An approach focused on individuals (e.g., Mr. X was beaten in prison, can you help with his situation), rather than human rights across the board, seems to work. Economically, the republic and city appear prosperous, due to thriving agricultural and petroleum sectors. The republic is reportedly suffering less from the economic crisis than Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk with their reliance on metallurgical industries. The city itself is much cleaner and greener than Yekaterinburg, and we did not encounter any traffic jams, due to broader roads, and a more liberal use of left turn arrow traffic lights. Users of the American Corner are delighted with the resource but the director appears to need more guidance and programming ideas.
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